

**Summary**  
**of the**  
**5 Steps To Successful Conflict Resolution**  
**by Erin Foord, OCDS**

The goal is to manage the conflict. Don't let the conflict manage you. This requires love, humility, and practicing the five steps that show the way to effectively managing conflict in your life.

**Step One: Verify that a conflict exists and prepare to discuss it.**

- a. Calm down the conflicting situation.
- b. Determine if a mediator is needed.
- c. Establish ground rules for the discussion.
- d. Reiterate boundaries, and identify any transgressions.

**Step Two: Identify the source of the conflict.**

- a. Identify what each heard (active or authentic listening).
  1. Encourage
  2. Paraphrase
  3. Clarify
  4. Summarize
  5. Reflect
  6. Validate
- b. Identify what each said (assertive communication).
  1. Assertive
  2. Passive
  3. Aggressive
- c. Identify how each feels.
- d. Identify what each wants.

**Step Three: Agree on the problem.**

- a. Agree on the understanding of each other's position.
- b. Agree on the exact issues in conflict.

**Step Four: Brainstorm possible solutions.**

- a. What is each willing to do to resolve the conflict?
- b. What is each not willing to do?

**Step Five: Negotiate a solution.**

- a. Agree to and when necessary, document and sign, the resolution.
  - 1. Accommodation
  - 2. Compromise
  - 3. Collaboration
- b. Act on it.
- d. Know when it's not working.

**“Conflict Resolution”**  
**by Erin Foord, OCDS**

As you are well aware, the Order of Discalced Carmelites is no stranger to conflict! The order was conceived from the conflict that waged within Teresa’s own heart. God’s call for her to break from the status quo caused her much anxiety, as well as causing division and conflict within her community at the Incarnation Monastery. Later she was accused of demonic illusions and her writings were suspected of heresy by the Inquisition. John of the Cross was captured, imprisoned in a tiny cell, humiliated, starved, and beaten. He was abused for months because of his support for Teresa and the reform, until he was finally saved from certain death by a daring escape. He was eventually stripped of his authority and removed from office. Saint Teresa’s director and confidant, Fr. Jeronimo Gracián, who had for ten years championed the reform, was forced into hiding. Then the victim of falsified evidence, he was expelled from the order, only recently to be posthumously reinstated. During the times of severest conflict, even Teresa’s supporters, cautioned her to stop and rethink her actions, in genuine fear for her safety as well as their own.

The founders of the reform did not enjoy conflict, but where would the Order of Discalced Carmelites be today if Teresa would have listened to those who cautioned her to avoid it? Rather, by her words and actions she inspires others to, *“have courage for whatever comes in life - everything lies in that.”* The point is neither to encourage conflict nor to avoid it. As is clear in the life of Saint Teresa, we want to face it head on with courage and charity, learn from it and resolve it.

OCDS community life is intended to be an environment that provides support for one another’s vocation. It is intended to stimulate growth in individual formation as Christians and Carmelites, through opportunities for greater understanding and the practice of virtues. Saint Teresa declared, *“What a great favor God does to those He places in the company of good people!”*

The members of any community will have diverse personalities, skills, and interests. This makes each of us unique, exciting, and can provide challenging opportunities when we come together. Sometimes these opportunities may come disguised as disagreements and conflicts within the community. They are a fact of life and when managed appropriately should be seen, not only as normal, but as healthy, maturing, and beneficial for the individual members and the community as a whole.

A disagreement is not a conflict. A disagreement is defined as a difference of opinion, based upon one's personal values, needs, interests, and intentions. We all have opinions and ways of doing things and we should not be threatened by opposing views or alternate ways of behaving. It is normal and expected that we are not going to agree with every member of the community on every issue. To disagree is natural and should be seen as beneficial and positive. It is an opportunity to gain new understanding and practice the virtues as we continue to strive together toward common goals. We are expected to develop the skills needed to interact with different personalities and situations with peace and integrity.

A disagreement can become a conflict when it begins to gain momentum and is recognized by more of the community, or becomes prolonged in nature and refuses to go away. A conflict is a strong, serious, or extended dispute. It is described as a collision of values, needs, interests, or intentions that leads to prolonged struggle or strife. It may be over a perceived incompatibility of ideas, beliefs or goals, and each opposing party sees their side as the only way to achieve their goals and objectives. It often occurs in interpersonal relationships over miscommunication, clashing personalities, negative politics, or previously unresolved disputes. Most issues occur when basic needs or values are not met, or when an individual or group is perceived as obstructing the interests or intentions of another. They often involve struggles over the use or misuse of resources and authority. They may appear explosively, as when

two members of the group burst out yelling at each other. Or they may emerge more subtly when members constantly criticize one another. A conflict is different than a disagreement because of its negative effects. A conflict can be more than a dispute. It is anything that impedes your mission or causes you to struggle.

Unresolved conflict is dysfunctional and unhealthy. It has an ill effect on our emotions, causing feelings of discord and disharmony. We've all seen situations where good people with different goals and needs have come into conflict. We are all aware of the often-intense personal animosity that can result when it is not resolved quickly and with integrity. When conflict is not handled effectively, the results can be incredibly damaging and destructive to the community and its goals. Conflicting positions can quickly turn into personal dislike. Differences between people can spiral out of control, resulting in confrontational situations, where people revert to “fight or flight” modes of behavior. Fight or flight behavior is a biological response activated by acute stress that prepares one to confront or flee a threatening situation. The intention becomes about winning or giving up. It results in co-operation and relationships breaking down and people disengaging from their purpose. It's easy to end up in a vicious downward spiral of negativity and recrimination that is accompanied by loss of affinity, hostility, suspicion, and distrust. It becomes a source of divisiveness polarizing the community, threatening its unity and mission.

Given the seriousness of these harmful effects, it is easy to understand the misconception that conflict should be avoided at all costs. But it is actually ignoring or avoiding a conflict, causing it to remain unidentified and unresolved, that it becomes detrimental to those involved and to the community. It introduces fear into the group interaction straining its cohesiveness. When fear of confrontation or offending another's feelings, causes a conflict to go ignored and unresolved, it remains seething beneath the

surface of the community poisoning interactions and relationships. In addition, attempting to avoid, ignore, or deny a conflict often ends in evading controversial decisions and thus accepts decisions by default. The result you get by not making a decision, which usually favors the *status quo*, can cause the community to stagnate. Then what? When people aren't being nourished spiritually you will see it in the attendance. So, is low attendance a problem or a symptom?

A conflict needs to be identified and addressed to keep your community working effectively. It helps to take a proactive and positive approach to stop the downward spiral and to calm down the conflicting situation as soon as possible. Once a conflict is identified, it is permissible to defer from addressing it, for a specified length of time, for the purposes of prayer, to gain more information, or to include others who can help resolve the issue. Again, every disagreement is not a conflict. It is fine to avoid, ignore, or refuse to address a disagreement, especially when the issue is outside the mission and goals of the community or when the controversy is trivial. Disagreements about national politics or the latest Marian apparition have no place within the community. Differences of this nature do not need to be addressed. Those having an issue should be told that the subject is inappropriate during the community meeting. When in doubt, it is perfectly fine to identify an issue and ask the participants if they need help to manage or settle the dispute. Discussion should be courteous and non-confrontational, and the focus should be on issues rather than on individuals. Keeping contentious discussions positive and constructive helps to prevent the antagonism and dislike which so often causes conflicts to spiral out of control.

Conflict can, and should be, used to your advantage. As long as people listen carefully and explore facts, issues, and possible solutions appropriately, conflict can be resolved effectively. Ideally you can adopt an approach that meets the situation, resolves the problem, respects people's legitimate

interests, and mends damaged relationships. Resolving conflict quickly and effectively, leads to personal and community growth. It will solve the problems that were brought to the surface, and provide various other benefits that might not have been expected. For instance, no community is perfect, and conflicts help to identify issues or areas that require the community's attentiveness. Becoming familiar with the ideas and interpretations of others helps our understanding to grow and mature, expanding our awareness and sharpening our focus. It enhances our effectiveness as it prompts us to examine our goals in close detail and to understand the things that are most important to us and why. Conflict can also be one of the best opportunities to strengthen relationships. Improved group cohesion comes about when conflict is resolved effectively, because community members develop stronger mutual respect and a renewed faith in their ability to work together—even through difficulties.

The following five-step process is useful for effectively managing conflict in our communities, in relationships, or in other situations. These steps won't guarantee an agreement, but they greatly improve the likelihood that the problems can be understood, solutions explored, and consideration of the advantages of a resolution can occur within a relatively constructive environment. They provide useful strategies that reduce the impacts of stress, fear, and other surprise factors involved in dealing with conflict. These steps help to stop viewing conflict as a road block and to start viewing it as an opportunity, just as we might view suffering as an opportunity to help others. This change in goal—from one of winning or giving up to one of learning and growing relationships—gives new perspective, allowing healthy conflict management. The goal is to manage the conflict. Don't let the conflict manage you. It requires love, humility, and practicing the five self-intuitive steps that show the way to effectively managing conflict in your life.

**Step One: Verify that a conflict exists and prepare to discuss it.**

- a. Calm down the conflicting situation.
- b. Determine if a mediator is needed.
- c. Establish ground rules for the discussion.
- d. Reiterate boundaries, and identify any transgressions.

**Step Two: Identify the source of the conflict.**

- a. Identify what each heard (authentic listening).
- b. Identify what each said (assertive communication).
- c. Identify how each feels.
- d. Identify what each wants.

**Step Three: Agree on the Problem.**

- a. Agree on the understanding of each other's position.
- b. Agree on the exact issues in conflict.

**Step Four: Brainstorm Possible Solutions.**

- a. What is each willing to do for resolution?
- b. What is each not willing to do?

**Step Five: Negotiate a Solution.**

- a. Agree to, and when necessary document and sign, the resolution.
- b. Act on it.
- d. Know when it's not working.

“And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection.” (Col. 3:14) Saint Paul instructs that all our interactions should be from an attitude of love, a sincere care and concern for the other person. We should never want to ridicule or demean the ideas or actions of another. Nor should we withdraw or feel hurt when others disagree with us. St. Teresa confirms that, “It is love alone that gives worth to all things”. She explains this fraternal charity as solidarity with others and abnegation of oneself for the sake of others, along with reconciliation and forgiveness in the face of offenses. She states, “Do not imagine, my sisters, that the things I shall recommend you to practice are many. I will confine myself to three points. The first is the love we ought to have for one another; the second, detachment from all created things; the third, true humility, which, though mentioned last, is the principal virtue and embraces all the others”. (*Way of Perfection*, IV, 4).

This is what we should be practicing during our community meetings together. The emphasis should be a discussion among friends, where topics are presented and discussed in fraternal charity and humility. When conflicts arise they should be managed with forgiveness, trust, hope and patience: Not in fear, not with anger or blame, but directly and lovingly with the truth, to empower, not to defeat. Then the resolution of the conflict will truly be amazing, and the results will make the difference between a healthy and an unhealthy community.

I mention that these steps are self intuitive. What does that mean? Let's present an example. Let's say that you are leading a formation class. Everything is going well when out of nowhere two of the attendees start yelling at one another. What is on your mind at this point? It should be to identify what the screaming is about. That is what I mean by self intuitive.

**Step One: Verify that a conflict exists and prepare to discuss it.**

The first step is to verify that a conflict exists. Maybe the members just overreacted, have recomposed themselves, and aren't angry with each other at all. Yet there will always be conflicts within every community. They can erupt seemingly out of nowhere, taking you by surprise and causing havoc. However, it does not have to be a mysterious, destructive force when you can better recognize when it occurs and how to resolve it in a healthy and constructive way. It is the duty of every leader to manage conflict, swiftly and without bias, in order to maintain community stability.

**a. Calm down the conflicting situation.**

Now back to our scenario. Before you can verify whether or not a conflict exists, what do you have to do? Remember, our two members were just screaming at each other. Yes, calm down the conflicting situation as soon as

possible. Start with yourself, be calm and have your emotions under control. Create a personally affirming environment. Have good eye contact, and speak in a calm and clear tone of voice, with a relaxed body posture. Treat those involved with respect. Treating one another calmly and doing your best to be courteous and remain constructive even under pressure builds mutual respect.

**b. Determine if a mediator is needed.**

So the two members get calm, and you ask if they feel comfortable working the issue out on their own. One of them gestures aggressively, saying, *“She had better not mess with me!”* If the parties involved feel unable to manage the conflict themselves, they will need the help of a third party. It may be very difficult for the parties to work together, especially if there has been any experience of negativity, recrimination, hostility, suspicion, or distrust. It may be necessary to appoint a mediator, one who recognizes the conflict as a problem in the community. It is important to have someone from the group, preferably from the council, someone whom both parties in the dispute trust to be impartial, who can walk them through the resolution process.

**c. Establish ground rules for the discussion.**

You decide from the member’s aggressive attitude that you will mediate this situation. You ask what’s going on. One member begins to explain her side of the issue when the other blurts out, *“She’s a liar!”* What do you do now? Yes, you establish ground rules for the discussion. Ground rules are statements that reflect people's best intentions regarding how they wish to treat one another in civil dialogue. In conflictive, challenging situations, ground rules should be the first and most important thing to keep in mind in order to improve the likelihood of a civil, constructive discussion. Identify ground rules that work for all parties as you attempt to negotiate solutions to the conflicts before you. Simple ground rules include:

1. One person will speak at a time.
2. Listen to one another with respect.
3. Seek to understand one another's point of view before responding to, or refuting it.
4. Be flexible and patient about differing perceptions of the issues at hand.
5. Address the issues involved, not the people who promote them.
6. Support the expression of dissent without retribution.
7. Honor the confidentiality of discussions, within reasonable parameters that are clear to all.

**d. Reiterate boundaries, and identify any transgressions.**

Along with identifying ground rules, it is necessary to reiterate boundaries, and identify if there were any transgressions. Boundaries indicate a border or limit and define the limits and responsibilities of the people with whom we interact. It is important to understand what boundaries are and how they work within relationships and to recognize the symptoms of boundary issues. It is understandable when boundary violations become the source of conflict, but what is not as easily recognized is that it is often due to boundaries being unclear, undefined or ambiguous.

We should become familiar with the basic boundary principles and discover the process for developing healthy boundaries. It is important to draw and identify boundaries when other persons treat us in an unacceptable way. The first step in setting boundaries is self-awareness. For example, pay close attention to the situations when you lose energy, feel a knot in your stomach, or feel frustrated. Identify where you need more space, respect, or general empowerment. Be firm, gracious and direct. When faced with resistance, repeat your statement or request and back up your boundary with action. If you give in, you invite people to ignore your needs.

Let's return to the conflict between our two members and see how things are progressing. We have moved into a room where we can mediate a

conversation with privacy in an affirming environment. We have identified the ground rules for the conversation as well as reiterated each other's boundaries. We discovered that this is not about a boundary transgression. If it was, a simple apology on the part of the offender, will usually resolve the issue. So, what is the next step in understanding the problem?

### **Step Two: Identify the source of the conflict.**

We need to identify the source of the conflict. But before attempting to resolve conflict with another person, we need to be sure we do not have conflict within ourselves. Internal conflict can cause strife that is sometimes more difficult to identify and resolve. To add to this, our emotions, behavior, and reactions are not consistent. They are affected by all the other events happening in our lives. We can be unhappy with no apparent reason and may argue about one thing when we are really upset about another completely separate event. We may believe we are personally attacked when someone merely disagrees or presents an idea contrary to our own. We need to understand our perceptual filters, biases, and emotional triggers, and check ourselves to make sure we are not the problem or that we are not taking our own issues out on another person.

In other words, don't fight when you don't even know what you stand for. Be sensitive to your own personal struggles to avoid projecting problems on others, and creating external conflict where none exists. Similarly, we need to recognize our own personal baggage and be aware that many of our positions are not necessarily reasonable ones. Often our opinions have been given us by others, and over the years we have developed emotional attachments to them ("My dad always said..."). It is no wonder we run into conflicts and battle to communicate successfully. These differences sometimes rub each other the wrong way and affect the way we respond to situations that lead to understandable consequences. Becoming more aware of our own personal

beliefs, goals, and values as well as noticing our behaviors will help to self-manage the conflict in our lives. It is necessary to understand the source of the conflict before using strategies to fix it. The way to do this is to verify what was heard and what was said, how each feels and what each wants.

**a. Identify what each heard (active or authentic listening)**

In our dialog with the two members the mediator is asking each to explain their version of the events. To verify what each heard it is important to develop our listening skills and practice the use of active or authentic listening, which is the first step to communicate with integrity. It involves making a special effort to listen to the other person and asking questions to understand their point of view. Unfortunately, it's common for people to think they're listening, while in their heads they're actually formulating their next response, thinking to themselves how wrong the other person is, or doing things other than trying to understand the other person's position. It's also common to be so defensive and entrenched in your own perspective that you literally can't hear the other person's point of view. We need to train ourselves to listen to the arguments of those with whom we disagree and to challenge ourselves to work hard to understand the reasoning of those whose values differ from our own. This is where the mediator can help each side to hear what the other is saying by asking the appropriate questions.

Authentic listening involves responding to the speaker in ways which indicate that we care about what is being said and give every opportunity for them to complete their train of thought. It's important to listen to understand, not just the words, but the underlying message of what someone is saying. Focusing our attention on their words and feelings with the specific intent to understand their perspective will hopefully begin to make some progress towards resolution. When we truly come to understand the other person's point of view, it helps to clarify why the situation became contested. Also when we devote ourselves to active listening, we significantly improve the likelihood

that our ideas and feelings, in turn, will be listened to and understood by the other person.

When listening to the other person's point of view, follow these six techniques: encourage, paraphrase, clarify, summarize, reflect, and validate.

**To encourage** the other person means to share his or her issues as fully as possible. It's vital to understand the other person's perspective, rather than just our own. It can disclose the information that will help to bridge the gap between two perspectives, and to understand where the disconnect lies. Encourage also, with nonverbal cues. Make sure your posture indicates you're interested in what is being said. Maintain eye contact, nodding when appropriate, and smiling or otherwise physically communicating your attention to what is being said. Examples of encouraging questions include: "I really want to understand what has upset you."

**To paraphrase** is restating the same information that was heard in different words. Different words are used to draw attention to particular concerns or aspects. Paraphrasing helps to clarify the message. It demonstrates that the message has been heard and understood. If it has not been understood correctly, the speaker has an opportunity to clarify their meaning. It may be that the other person will then realize that additional information is needed. An example of paraphrasing is the statement, "So you felt irritated by my criticism of your comments."

**To clarify** is to request additional explanation regarding an element of discussion that was vague. Clarify the real issues, rather than making assumptions. Inviting the speaker to elaborate allows the hearer an opportunity to verify the accuracy of the conversation. Ask questions that allow you to gain this information, and which lets the other person know you are trying to understand. Examples of clarifying questions include: "I am not sure I understand. Can you say more about that?"

**To summarize** is to focus on the main points of a conversation in order to highlight them. By tying the different elements together the general idea of what was heard is related back to verify its accuracy. Summarizing also allows the participants to recognize general themes in the discussion. An example of a summarizing statement is, "So it was the repeated criticisms that upset you."

**To reflect** on what was said is to rephrase the affect, or feelings, within the message. Reflecting gives the speaker the opportunity to hear his or her own thoughts in a different way and helps them to become aware of and acknowledge their feelings. Reflecting also helps a speaker feel that he or she is understood and that you have paid attention to what he or she has said. When you reflect feelings, be as clear as possible with a statement like, "I can understand how upsetting that could be."

**To validate** the concerns of the other person acknowledges that we respect their perception of the issues and reassures them it is okay to have the feelings and thoughts they have. It can be a very powerful message when it is conveyed with integrity and respect to help people feel heard, acknowledged, understood and accepted. An example of a statement that validates is, "I'm glad we are trying to work this out."

**b. Identify what each said (assertive communication).**

When attempting to resolve conflicts, how effectively we express ourselves is as important as how effectively we listen. Now is the time to get your own concerns communicated as clearly and specifically as possible. The challenge is to do so in a manner that is likely to be heard and understood by the other person. In that regard, it is important to be aware that the language we have learned to convey our ideas may be wrought with inefficiencies and problems. Often certain expressions can become highly charged and present something unintended to our audience. Saying the wrong thing can be like

throwing fuel on a fire, making a conflict worse. So, communicating your feelings and needs clearly will help in self managing conflict with others. It is important to be familiar with the three main styles of communication: the assertive, passive, and aggressive styles.

**Assertive** communication is a style in which individuals clearly state their opinions and feelings, and firmly advocate for their rights and needs without violating the rights of others. The important thing to remember is to say what's on your mind in a way that is clear and assertive, without being aggressive, putting the other person down or on the defensive. Assertive communicators will state needs and wants and express feelings clearly, appropriately, and respectfully. Using "I" statements they will communicate respect for others. They will have good eye contact, and speak in a calm and clear tone of voice, with a relaxed body posture. They will stand up for their rights and not allow others to abuse or manipulate them. The assertive ability to communicate active, respectful, goal-oriented messages, may be contrasted to the passive or the aggressive styles of communication.

**Passive** communicators tend to convey needs vaguely in a manner that is often confusing to the listener. This style of communication can be common among persons who seek to be humble and self-surrendering. They will often fail to assert themselves, allow others to deliberately or inadvertently infringe on their rights, fail to express their feelings, needs, or opinions, and tend to speak softly or apologetically. As a result, passive individuals do not respond overtly to hurtful or anger-inducing situations. Instead, they allow grievances and annoyances to mount, usually unaware of the buildup. Then, once they have reached their tolerance for unacceptable behavior, they are prone to explosive outbursts, which are usually out of proportion to the triggering incident. After the outburst, however, they feel shame, guilt, and confusion, so they return to being passive.

**Aggressive** communicators attempt to suppress ideas and opinions other than their own. They express their opinions and advocate for their needs in a way that violates the rights of others, sometimes to the extent of being verbally abusive. This may be accomplished in several ways, raising their voice, belittling another person or their ideas, assuming agreement when there isn't any, and trying to circumvent the voting process ("I thought we all agreed with my position.") They try to dominate others, use humiliation to control others, criticize, blame, or attack others, speak in a loud, demanding, and overbearing voice, act threateningly and rudely, do not listen well, interrupt frequently, have threatening eye contact, an overbearing posture, and use "you" statements.

The quickest way of identifying blame and judgment is when the word "you" is used. For example: "You're a liar", "you never listen", "you don't care". It comes off as more of a judgment or an attack, and puts people on the defensive. In comparison, assertive communication tries to eliminate blame and judgment. It starts the statement with "I", which shows ownership of your reactions, and less blame. The point is to make the focus on how you are feeling and how you are affected by the other person's behavior. For example, in the resolution discussion of our two members, when the second member was invited to explain herself, she points accusingly in the direction of the other member and blurts out, "You always interrupt me and never listen!" Notice the contrast between the 'I message': "I feel when you interrupt me that you don't want to listen." The first response is a judgment assigning blame. The second is a personal opinion seeking a response. It sounds much calmer and more inviting of discussion. Using factual statements, rather than judgments or labels, provides a direct, non-attacking, more responsible way of letting people know how their behavior affects you.

Now is the time to put everything together that we've done thus far. With authentic listening and assertive communication, identify how each member of

the dispute feels and what each wants. Encourage each to assert their needs clearly and specifically, then listen well and build from what is heard. Ask each for their viewpoint and validate your respect for their opinion and cooperation in solving the problem. Pay attention to the interests that are being presented. Listen first. Talk second. To solve a problem effectively we have to understand where the other person is coming from before defending our own position. By listening carefully you'll most likely understand why the person is adopting his or her position. Try to understand the other person's motivations and goals, and see how your actions may be affecting these. Also, try to understand the conflict in objective terms. Be sure to practice the skills that have been discussed. Focus on the issues and leave personalities out of the discussion. Listen with empathy and see the conflict from the other person's point of view. Identify issues clearly and concisely. Use "I" statements. Remain calm but flexible and clarify feelings.

Often by this stage, the conflict may already be identified. Once we understand the other person's perspective, and they understand ours, a mutually satisfactory solution often becomes readily apparent. If the conflict was based on a misunderstanding or a lack of insight to the other person's point of view, a simple apology can work wonders. However, you may also have uncovered real differences between your positions. It is important to understand that the conflict is probably a mutual problem, which may best be resolved through discussion and negotiation, rather than raw aggression. You may feel frustrated, but work to get to the root of the conflict. Screaming and cussing someone out will not feel good in the long run. The conflict is going to continue until the conflicted values and expectations are exposed. Attempt to get to the underlying interests, needs, and concerns.

### **c. Identify how each feels.**

An important component of conflict resolution involves knowing how each person feels and why they feel the way they do. Getting in touch with our own feelings is not always easy, but it is especially important. It may seem our feelings should already be obvious to us, but this isn't always the case. Sometimes we feel angry or resentful, but don't know why. Other times, we feel that the other person isn't doing what they "should," but we aren't aware of exactly what we want from them, or if it's even reasonable. We need to get in touch with our own feelings, thoughts and expectations so we are better able to communicate them to the other person.

In order to make identifying your feelings easier, start with the facts. The most effective way of understanding what is happening is to ask yourself a number of questions: Who is involved? What happens? When does it occur? Be as specific as you can. Don't merely say that the person is difficult, rather state that it is when they lose their temper that conflict arises, or when you feel they get arrogant or sarcastic. Once you have all of those details you can then turn to your emotions. What do you feel in the situation? You need to determine exactly what emotions arise under those circumstances. When things get heated it is often easy to become lost in a sea of feelings and it is only later on that one can really identify and understand what is happening.

### **d. Identify what each wants.**

When we clash with others, our struggle is really about having what we want and need. Clarify the personal needs threatened by the dispute, and think about what needs to change in order for you to no longer struggle in this area. What is needed is to understand what is truly happening and what we are really wanting. Now that we understand the situation and what is going on inside ourselves, the next thing is to decide and be clear on exactly what it is that we want, need, and prefer. Knowing what we want will make resolving the

conflict easier. Typically our emotions can get in the way and reasonable solutions are difficult to access. Again, look at the details of the situation and determine how you would like it to be different. You have identified how you feel, now consider how you *want* to feel and what is required for you to feel this way. Then communicate that in a non-judgmental and clear way. In delivering assertive messages, stay focused on those ideas and feelings that are truly meaningful to you. Keep those needs that you have clarified in the forefront of your consideration as your true "desired outcome" from the conversation.

### **Step Three: Agree on the problem.**

This sounds like an obvious step, but people often hold very different perceptions of a problem and define it differently. We tend to perceive and define problems according to our different underlying needs, interests and goals. We'll need to agree to the problem that we are trying to solve before we'll find a mutually acceptable solution.

#### **a. Agree on the understanding of each other's position.**

Sometimes a common perception of the problem can't be reached, but at the very least, each person should be able to understand what the other person identifies as the problem. Reflect what you hear the other person identify as the source of the conflict, and restate it in your own words. Remain open to hearing new information that can be meaningful to you, and remain flexible regarding your definition of the issues to be addressed. As the conversation progresses, build upon what is learned. Revise and assert your perception again... calmly, clearly and specifically. One may reasonably expect to go back and forth a few times, just clarifying and understanding the definition of what each identifies as the problem. Do not rush this process.

**b. Agree on the exact issues in conflict.**

Different people may see different problems. At the end of this conversation all involved should be able to recognize the real problem or problems that need to be solved, and define them in similar terms. They should understand the areas of difference, and should identify what each of their needs is, along with any additional information that may be required before being able to examine possible solutions.

**Step Four: Brainstorm possible solutions.**

Once you understand the other person's perspective and they understand yours, and you have agreed to the source of the conflict, or at least to what each identifies as the source, it's time to find a resolution—a solution you both can live with. Brainstorm possible solutions, and be open to all ideas, including ones you have never considered before. List possible solutions and do not limit yourself to obvious answers. Generate several possible solutions to the problem, "brainstorming" ideas and making sure that all parties participate in the process. If everyone is going to feel satisfied with the solution, it will help for everyone to have had fair input in generating the options.

**a. What is each willing to do to resolve the conflict?**

Explore options together. Be open to the idea that a mutually beneficial position exists, and that you can get to this idea jointly. It is important to defer judgments and evaluations of potential solutions. To not do so, prematurely risks creating a "chilling effect" on the further generation of ideas. If one idea is rejected too quickly, other ideas may be similarly rejected without appropriate consideration. Even if you quickly identify an acceptable solution, it is useful to explore a few additional ideas before settling on the best answer to the problem. Find a compromise or middle ground. The important thing is to come

to a place of understanding, and try to work things out in a way that's respectful to all involved.

**b. What is each *not* willing to do?**

It is also helpful to examine what our boundaries are in the situation. What are we *not* willing to do? Examine the consequences of not resolving the conflict. Thinking about what will happen if the situation is not resolved helps clarify our needs. Rather than constraining our creativity and flexibility, this analysis actually clarifies our priorities and, as a result, gives us a greater willingness to explore possible solutions.

**Step Five: Negotiate a solution.**

In the majority of cases, a simple and obvious answer will present itself. If the conflict is based on a misunderstanding or a lack of insight to the other's point of view, the resolution will be obvious and adding a few boundaries may be effective. In cases where there's a conflict about an issue and both people don't agree, you have a few options: Sometimes when an issue is minor you, can achieve peace by respectfully agreeing to disagree, other times you can find a compromise or middle ground, and in other cases the person who feels more strongly about an issue may get their way. If you have uncovered real differences between your positions, then a little more work is required. Now is the time to put everything you have done thus far together: what you feel, what you want and what you are willing to sacrifice. There are three guiding principles here: be calm, be patient, have respect.

**b. Agree to, and when necessary document and sign, the resolution.**

Allow all involved to give input and select the best solution. This is where a technique like win-win negotiation can be useful to find a solution that, at least to some extent, satisfies everyone. Compromise if necessary, when goals and values differ too much. As you reach agreement regarding solutions to

each of the problems being negotiated, summarize these ideas in writing and restate them back to each other to be sure everyone agrees with both the intent of the solution and its specific language. It may be appropriate to leave some things a bit ambiguous, until other issues are discussed, and this is fine. Just be sure that at the end of the discussion, there is a clear record that accurately conveys to all parties as well as others who may have a need to understand, how the problem has been solved, what you are intending to do, and how you plan to do it.

Three major strategies exist to resolve conflict; accommodation, compromise, and collaboration. Each will be useful in different situations.

**Accommodating** is the style that indicates a willingness to meet the needs of others at the expense of one's own needs. Accommodation is appropriate when the issues matter more to the other party, or when peace is more valuable than winning. This may be effective in certain limited situations but overall this approach is unlikely to give the best outcomes.

**Collaborating** is the style where you agree to work together in support of common goals or concerns. You are not willing to sacrifice, but find it worthwhile to work together because the alternatives are more costly to each of you. Your decision is based upon self-interest and your best opportunity to achieve your needs.

**Compromising** is an approach where you try to find a solution that will at least partially satisfy everyone. Each of the parties gives up something in order to get something in return. It is a “meeting half-way” strategy for settling most disputes. It represents the best way to get along and improve relationships. You know what you want or need, but it doesn't necessarily mean that it is reasonable for the other person to simply provide it. They also have wants and needs. Everyone is expected to give something up. Now your

task is to determine what you will be willing to do or sacrifice in order to improve the situation and resolve the conflict. Ludwig Erhard suggests that, "A compromise is the art of dividing a cake in such a way that everyone believes he has the biggest piece."

While occasionally people are feeling pretty good at this point, they are much more commonly feeling exhausted and uncertain. Therefore, the final step of the process is just as important as the others along the way. As you come to the conclusion of the negotiation process, identify areas of agreement as clearly and specifically as possible, preferably in writing. Then review the agreement in light of the following "hallmarks":

Is it fair? Do all parties feel the agreement is fair and reasonable?

Is the agreement balanced? Does everyone have a stake and role in its implementation?

Are the action steps realistic? Do we have the time, energy, skills and resources to follow-through and implement this agreement?

Is the agreement specific enough to proceed? Does everyone understand what we need to do and when we need to do it?

### **c. Act on it.**

As your conversation concludes, leave the session with a commitment to implement the plans that you have determined together. If unexpected problems or challenges come up (for example, someone gets sick or unexpected changes make it difficult to implement the agreement), communicate openly with one another about these challenges. As appropriate, sit down again in order to renegotiate solutions on the basis of the new information. Try to remember that, if something doesn't happen when you expected it to, it doesn't mean that the other person has abandoned the agreement or is intentionally sabotaging the process. People generally try their hardest to make things work,

and it is important to communicate with each other about potential pitfalls before they fester and become a crisis.

**d. Know when it's not working.**

It is often useful to build into the agreement, an opportunity to "check back" with each other to evaluate the progress made towards implementation. It may turn out that by implementing solutions to the issues that were discussed, we realize there were other problems that may have been caused by our solution, or we weren't conscious of, or which we were reluctant to raise at the time. Such a meeting provides an opportunity to recognize each other's good work and progress together and can also provide an opportunity in which to explore additional issues and concerns. In this way, any concerns about the agreement can be uncovered in a timely way, rather than waiting for problems to worsen.

**In conclusion...**

Conflicts are becoming such a major issue in our groups and communities that our Province's OCDS Provincial Council will be writing a new "Provincial Statute" to address them. The process outlined in this document is a simple, yet effective means of understanding and dealing with conflictive situations. The goal is to enhance our opportunities to effectively negotiate solutions to the conflicts we confront in our communities. When we learn to deal with conflict appropriately, then conflicts will make life interesting and will help us feel more empowered in our relationships as well as more satisfied in our life.